

ELECTIONS: THE ROAD AHEAD

by
Patricia A. Butenis
U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh
December 17, 2006

Thank you for your kind introduction, Professor Nabi. Thank you also to the Bangladesh Association of American Studies for giving me the opportunity to exchange views about democracy and the upcoming election in Bangladesh. Faculty and students of Dhaka University, assalamu alaykum and good morning.

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today. As the future leaders of Bangladesh, as representatives of this vibrant nation's best and brightest people, the burden and opportunities of leadership rest squarely on your shoulders. Let me start by asking you to tell me, with a show of hands, how many of you are registered to vote? How many of you will be voting for the first time? How many of you are registered to vote in more than one place? Have you tried to remove your name from the voter list in your old constituency?

I'm starting with these questions because we all know that you can't have democracy without elections, and that you can't have elections without voters. And, of course, you are the voters. It is the duty of citizens in any democracy to demand and defend their rights, and if the enumerators skipped you in making the new voter list or you had some other problem with the Election Commission, I urge you to stand up and be counted.

In some important ways, the United States and Bangladesh are admittedly far apart. In the United States, for example, most people think that cricket is just an insect that makes a charming chirping noise in the night, while in Bangladesh most people think that football is a game played only with your feet and occasionally your head.

But we have a long and successful bilateral partnership in many areas, from economic and social development to peacekeeping and counterterrorism, because we share common values and aspirations for freedom and a better life for our children.

The people of the United States and Bangladesh have a strong commitment to independence and democracy. We have fought hard to win and defend our freedom, and in that context I would like to congratulate you on the thirty-fifth anniversary of Victory Day, which was celebrated yesterday to commemorate the surrender of the Pakistani army which brought to an end nine months of terrible bloodshed and suffering.

Some of you may know the name of Archer Blood, who 35 years ago preceded me as the senior American diplomat in Bangladesh. His great commitment to reporting the truth and supporting human rights during a very difficult time, even at the expense of his own personal career, is a continuing inspiration to American diplomats around the world. It is only fitting that today the library at The American Center, which I hope all of you have used, is named in his honor.

Since independence, Bangladesh has made great strides in many areas, including education, agriculture, and health. It has defeated military dictatorship and held three successful general elections, sometimes in very difficult circumstances.

It's no secret that the United States Government takes a great interest in your upcoming election. And the reason is simple. Just about every issue that we care about that involves Bangladesh hinges on a successful election. The future of democracy itself in Bangladesh, the defense of your moderate traditions against extremism, stability in Bangladesh and South Asia as a whole, the ability of the economy to grow quickly enough to erode poverty levels, the ability of the government to combat terrorism and extremism, the ability to attack corruption, the ability to provide good governance for the people of Bangladesh – all of these vital objectives require a successful election to give you the platform to focus on the future instead of, for example, who was the first patriot to declare Bangladeshi independence. I do not mean to disparage the importance of historical truth but I have been struck by how much of public debate and discussion is focused on the past and not on the future, on what kind of country you want to live in.

What do I mean by a successful election? I mean an election in which all parties participate, whose outcome is broadly accepted as legitimate and accurate, an election where violence and intimidation did not keep people from voting or expressing their opinions, an election where minorities were not singled out for persecution, and an election where the playing field was more or less even.

Our interest, therefore, is focused on the electoral process, to be sure that it meets international standards of fair play and that it is consistent with Bangladesh's own laws and constitution. We do not favor or oppose any party or group. I have been accused by both of the major parties of supporting

the other. Both are wrong. In fact, we are confident that we can work effectively with the government regardless of which party wins the election.

The stakes are high for Bangladesh. As students, you have all suffered when hartals have shut down your schools and delayed your advancement, perhaps by a matter of years. You have all paid the price when so-called student groups representing the major political parties fight each other on campus and try to gain undue benefits for themselves and their supporters.

When I first arrived in Bangladesh eight months ago, I was struck by the frustration voiced to me by Bangladeshis from all walks of life about the condition of politics in Bangladesh today. Musclemen and black money, they complained, had ruined everything. Students, business people, and ordinary people have all suffered because the political parties of this great country could not agree on the basic rules of the game.

But I don't want to stand here and talk about what I think is wrong with the system. You know that better than I do. And I also don't want to dwell on solutions because I think everybody knows what they are. The hard part is actually creating political parties that are genuinely democratic in practice and outlook, parties that focus on issues and the national interest instead of personalities and perceptions of face, and parties that make decisions transparently and are accountable to their supporters and the people at large, not just at election time but between elections as well.

Instead, I would like to say a few words about the election looming before us. I am an optimist by nature and my observations reflect that optimism but my outlook on life is often severely challenged by your politics.

First, it is crucial that all parties participate in the elections. The people of Bangladesh deserve to have choices that reflect the diversity of opinion, philosophy, and even style that exists in this country's politics. I am not a lawyer and I'm certainly not a constitutional expert, but issues related to the election are fundamentally political and therefore require political solutions, which puts the burden primarily on political parties to come to agreement on any remaining obstacles to full participation in a fair election.

I am encouraged, therefore, to see that the opposition is moving forward with its preparations for elections, and that both major parties are working with the Election Commission to improve the voter list. I don't think, however, that we can take the opposition's participation for granted. There remain grounds for concern about the voters' list and it is crucial that the election commission continue to address and resolve them. We will continue to urge flexibility and dialogue on all sides.

Second, after the terrible, sobering violence in Dhaka on October 28, both political parties have generally exercised restraint on the streets. On the whole, they have not sought excuses or opportunities for confrontation; instead, they have cooperated with the police to minimize the risks of violence. Given the violent history of elections in Bangladesh, this is another positive development that deserves our recognition. It is, of course, essential that all parties continue to exercise such restraint; violence in the final but most intense weeks of the election period would be a serious threat to a successful, credible election. We will continue to urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint, and to condemn acts of violence when they do occur.

Third, civil society groups and some political parties have presented wide ranging proposals for improving the electoral process. Some of these proposals are long-term in nature, and many deserve serious consideration if the next election is to run more smoothly than this election. We will do what we can in the coming months to promote forums to discuss these important issues.

Fourth, the U.S. Government has long opposed hartals -- by any party - as outdated, confrontational, and undemocratic. The era of colonial struggle has passed. We also oppose nationwide transportation blockades, which hurt the economy and deprive millions of ordinary people of a fundamental human right, the right to free movement. It is a positive development that the blockades, and even the threat of blockades, have subsided. We again urge all parties to pursue their political objectives through democratic practices, not on the streets.

Fifth, both major political parties have shown flexibility on issues they once insisted had no room for compromise. Neither party has locked itself into an extreme position, despite earlier threats to do so. It is unfortunate that this level of flexibility was absent during the failed talks in September between the secretaries general of the two major parties, but, as we say in America, better late than never. We encourage the major parties to pursue new talks to narrow their differences, and urge the chief adviser to play a direct and neutral role in this effort.

Bangladeshis are justly proud of their innovative caretaker government system. It has worked well for you in the past, and this time it has served the nation best when the chief adviser worked closely with his advisers to try to broker a compromise electoral package. The resignation of the four caretaker government advisers was a great disappointment; they were sincere, capable, patriotic people, and their contribution will be sorely missed. I hope the chief adviser and his new team of advisers will redouble their efforts to create a positive electoral framework.

Some Bangladeshis have told me that this will be the last caretaker government because the judiciary, which is supposed to provide the leadership to the caretaker government, has become so politicized. Nevertheless, the caretaker government remains the constitutionally provided mechanism for preparing Bangladesh for elections. Any extra-constitutional arrangement imposed on the people of Bangladesh, such as military intervention, would not address the basic weaknesses afflicting the current political process, would likely lead to great turmoil and disappointment, and should be stoutly resisted by all defenders of democracy.

Especially as we head into the final weeks of this electoral process, it is doubly important that political parties stop trying to manipulate the caretaker government and that the caretaker government actively resist such interference, whether the pressure comes from the streets or from behind the scenes. The essence of caretaker government is impartiality. Whether it is the army, the state-run media, or the police, the credibility of the caretaker government depends on its acting in a visibly neutral and effective manner.

Unfortunately, the caretaker government has not always conducted itself neutrally, and the nation has suffered as a result. We hope that is behind us now.

I would like to conclude by repeating that the American interest in the Bangladesh election is focused on the process as it plays out on the ground. For the sake of both American and Bangladeshi interests, we seek a successful election that strengthens your democracy and puts you in a better position to deal with the many critical challenges facing this proud country. Again, we do not support or oppose any party.

This will be the most observed election in Bangladesh's history, with tens of thousands of Bangladeshi monitors and hundreds of foreign monitors blanketing the country. Many of the foreign monitors, including more than 90 from the United States, will be here for a long period of time. Thirteen monitors from the National Democratic Institute are already here in Bangladesh and will stay until one week after the election because we all know that elections are not necessarily won or lost just on polling day.

But at the end of the day, this election belongs to you. It is your duty to participate, to vote, and to hold your political leaders accountable for their performance and their promises. Democracy does not end on polling day. It starts on polling day, and continues in parliament and other democratic forums.

In closing, I cannot resist this opportunity to call on political parties to commit themselves, now, to work together in the next Parliament, whether as the treasury bench or the loyal opposition, to advance the country's economic, political, and social interests.

Thank you for your time. I would be pleased to take a few questions from the audience.

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GR/ December 17, 2006